

COMMENTARY: ACHIEVING ADEQUACY AND COMMITMENT IN PRAGMATICS

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If the thread that connects these papers one to another is the theme of “violence and social struggle,” they are at the same time quite diverse in approaches and subject matters. So diverse, in fact, that in order to see how they present material on “violence” and “social struggle,” we must begin by situating the variety of sociocultural material they bring to our attention in the story-lines, as it were, of their respective approaches. This grouping, or re-grouping, of the papers will, I think, lead us to seeing what is involved in giving what we might term an “adequate” pragmatic account of the phenomena they treat, though it is not my intention here to give an actual re-analysis of the various materials. My purpose is rather to be able to relate such criteria of adequacy to the particular commitments we have as social scientists to elucidating and thereby engaging with conditions that people more generally face in the inherent politics of sociocultural experience.

1. So close (to home), and yet so far

Perhaps the most straightforward material for us, the (upper?) middle-class, professional readership of *Pragmatics* in predominantly elite locations in transnational spacetime, is found in part of Haviland’s paper on “Shouts, shrieks, and shots,” in which a seemingly aggressive argument of two about-to-be-former university-connected roommates is laden with those stereotyped emotions of the sparring domestic couple: Invective, thrusts-and-parries of accusation and denial, self-expression and “phatic” functionality—even if decidedly negative—and a sense we can read out of the pieces of the transcript that though this be a moment of explosive confrontation, there will be remorse and regret when the parties are later separated on their own. We can recognize all too well the previously unmet interactional and emotional needs of at least one of the pair of interactants, and therefore we understand part of the emotional dynamic that our cultural norms license to her in this frenzied attempt to get some attention paid, even if in an argument.

But Haviland’s story about this transcript snippet also needs to get our attention, because, as he claims, those who have somehow managed to remain uninformed about contemporary pragmatics might see its “violence” through the cataract-opaque lenses of aged and unsophisticated conceptual and methodological approaches. He means, of course, two in particular, survivors from an age of scientific modernism in attempting to account for discursive interaction.

First are (neo-)Gricean attempts to understand the “violence” here. Such accounts would proceed in terms of looking at how each individual in an interaction could be said to be following

cooperative principles and conversational maxims as these apply to swatches of grammatically and lexically modeled text-sentences and their determinable fragment-types understood to be unfolding of information, that is, as modalized propositional communication.¹ And in such terms, interactional “aggression” must be equated with massive and relentless bi- or multi-lateral nonconformity-to-maxim: So is violence merely a denotational, and/or inferential, breakdown of transparency-to-maxim on the part of each person contributing to the denotational text of the event? Obviously a problematic result.

A second surviving scientific atavism in the study of discursive interaction is the approach now known as “conversation analysis,” with its fetishization of the moment-of-interaction frozen in vitro by transcriptional techniques, on the one hand, and its completely untheorized and sociologically locatable—i.e., “folk”—intuitionistic—re-labeling of any of its actually significant units of purported transcript analysis, “assessment,” “request,” “repair,” and even, as Haviland nicely uses his materials to show, assumed-to-be-sequential “turn,” i.e., “having the floor” in an intersubjectively ratified way. If one is a member of a group, one has clear intuitions about discursive interactions within the group one can contemplate through transcribed artifactuality. But what does one do when one is looking at some other system of interaction, one far from the ideological norms of polite pair-part dialogism?

Indeed, the roomies-at-war show us a complex poetics of textuality in which it is frequently arbitrary to say who “has the floor”; both interactants do, since, as ought to be quite obvious, we need to make a distinction between the “what-is-said” kind of textuality—in which conversation-analytic transcriptional practices still seem to operate, alas—and the “what-is-done” kind of textuality, the actual object of any sociocultural analysis of interaction in the sociocultural realm of cause-and-effect, in which conversation-analytic intuitionistic relabeling wants to operate so as to say something significant. But of course “having the floor,” like “requesting,” “answering,” “insulting,” etc. are a function of the poetics of interactional textuality, as this example, in this respect like Haviland’s other one involving a delicious political incident in Zinacantan, clearly demonstrates. We will return to these two textualities, the denotational and the interactional, later.

2. Violence narrated: Coaxed and coerced

A second kind of material we recognize comes from two institutional realms in which first-person narrative figures at key moments and in key ways. O’Connor’s presentation of

¹ Let us leave aside the gooey issue of intentionalisms—infinately regressive, “conventional” vs. actual, etc.—underlying Gricean communicative agentivity in respect of “non-natural meaning,” on which purportedly the whole approach depends: The autonomous agentive Sender’s (conventional vs. actual) intentions-to-have-recognized by the Receiver its clear and motivating Senderly intentionality in-and-at the moment of using a form communicatively by the deployment of that particular linguistic form with a “non-natural meaning.” Such intentions, of course, take the form of propositional attitudes of S and H, as for example, ‘Sender believes that p’, ‘Sender knows that p’, etc., where p ranges over states of the world, states of the communicative situation, states of the communicators, etc.—in fact, any propositions about anything that, when invoked in an inferential chain, make text “logical” to have been communicated in that context. Most neo-Griceans simply gloss over what is obviously an armchair pseudo-psychology that is nothing more than Western ideologies of autonomous mind and agentivity essentialized as some kind of mental stuff, its own brand of picture-theory of social cognition if not based on, then at least compatible with microeconomic models of rational market behavior—because both emerge from the same sociocultural system in which such social-scientifically ignorant but intelligent “natives” as Grice live(d).

“constructed dialogue and reflexivity in the discourse of violence” is located in the American prison system, where the material resulted from a therapeutic educational technique of coaxing narratives from prisoners about tension-filled situations, seemingly those where physical violence was experienced and/or perpetrated by the first-person character in the autobiographical past. Note the Bakhtinian complexities of ‘voicing’ that O’Connor’s material points out, the way that the representation of circumstances leading up to and consequent upon acts of physical violence are made vividly dialogical, aligning the various inhabited interactional roles across two frames (frame of the narrated events vs. frame of narration) as congruently or noncongruently in-group and out-group: Person narrating, person(s) narrated-about, interlocutory addressee(s) of the narrating person. The ‘I’ of these earlier incidents is a character in a Bildungsroman or morality play of which the outcome consciousness merges with the reflexive memory of the narrating prisoner, now older, wiser, and, withal, highly engaging about life “in the belly of the beast.”

O’Connor demonstrates how the voicing is didactic, thence self-apologetic, since indeed maxims of conduct for survival in the brutal American prison system, which in every case our first-person heroes have upheld, constitute the armature of the narrative practice. Even the vivid switching to narrative presents and the concurrent transposed indexical origo of perspectively spatializing terms in the most dramatic points of the narratives, are consistently used for voicing in this way. Violence survived, violence savored; violence inevitable as fate, as harsh as the most rigorous training for life that one could undergo, becomes here the mode of employment of these autobiographical accounts. There is no violence in the telling, note; in fact, the addressee(s), the “audience” as it is misnamed by folk account for monologic narrative, are precisely drawn in as sympathetic to the interested reflexive moral perspective of the narrator, it would seem.

But autobiographical or first-person narrative is also, as Briggs’s “notes on a ‘confession’” makes clear, a central mechanism in the operation of many legal and quasi-legal systems with the power to pardon or punish. His paper focuses on the multi-party construction of a set of first-person narratives—among them one taken to be the “confession” of a murder—in the course of a forensic investigation into circumstances that produced a dead neonate. Briggs uses a documentary record of legal text-artifacts to interrogate the circumstances of their production, i.e., the circumstances of the inscription of the text-artifacts as legal “transcript”-records. Note how there was purportedly a doubled moment of violence, the momentaneous birth and death of the child of one Herminia Gómez in the wee hours of 5 September 1992. And it is the aftermath of this moment that Briggs tries to reconstruct by looking at the intertextualities of the text-artifacts accumulated in medical and legal offices, showing a process of cumulative gelling or sedimenting of the verbal representations, such that later first-person narrative accounts as written down by officialdom start appearing more and more like earlier ones, indeed, allowing Briggs to layer the artifacts as a stratigraphy of emergently produced “factuality” through this relentless intertextuality (interdiscursivity). The Gómez first-person narrative inserts itself in a structured way into this emerging intertextual coherence. This performative “theory effect” (Bourdieu 1991: 132-36) of purportedly representational narrative prose — each narrator narrating in the first person about past events that “really happened,” recall!—narratively fixes guilt and exoneration for the violence through the cumulation of lexical choices, of construction-types, of metapragmatic descriptors of agentive acts, etc. that gradually become indispensable to everyone’s representations of what has happened, of who has done what to whom.

Briggs is suggesting that institutions such as these in the matter to hand are sites of a kind of violence, too, even though they are founded on an ideological stance of reflective

representationalism, that is, dealing in “just the facts, ma’am.” Recalling Bruno Latour’s *Science in Action*, which traces the emergence of a scientific fact over the course of repeated events of report (narration) in another institutional realm committed to reflective representationalism, the movement to facticity reconstructed in Briggs’s account seems to have all the subtlety of a tank in Tienanmen Square (if you will pardon the image of “violence!”). For the institutional structure of Venezuelan medicine, law, and administration of indigenous peoples (Ms Gómez is of Warao Indian parentage), together with the exploitative wage-labor system of quasi-indentured domestic service for such people, conspire here in historical realtime to define Ms Gómez as an autonomous, agentive, infanticidal murderer, isolating the moment of “violence” at issue in the forensic matter of the dead baby, to be sure, but at the same time claiming another victim, one subject to the violence of institutional semiosis (see Mehan 1996).

3. Spectator sports: Nested mediations of aggression

Two of the more complex situations considered here involve the staging of a dyadic agon as the interactional text that itself is directed as message to an “audience,” that is, to a public via the magic of mass media (print and broadcast). In each case, the “audience” are summoned to align themselves with one or another of the sides of the agon. Note that the form is much as in the jury system of litigational procedure, where two sides get to perform a contest of stories about a case-to-hand before a jury (and judge) who must aggregately (by vote) align itself, if possible, with one or another story.² In one of these cases, discussed by Agha, we have the vulgar comedy of a U.S. Presidential “debate”; from the “audience’s” or observer’s perspective, one might compare this situation to the stagedness of professional wrestling with its comic-book blows. In the other situation, discussed by Villalón and Angeleri, we have the melodrama of a public “negotiation”-through-declamation in the arena of Colombian constitutional legitimacy; from the “audience’s”—the publics in Colombia and Venezuela—observational perspective, this is like a hostage movie crossed by a suicide-bomber movie, the stuff of spectral terrorism (always aimed at terrorizing a public-at-large, not the actual face-to-face victims), only here in comic-opera reverse: The insurgents and the government of Colombia are engaged in a battle of wordy recitatives to win the sympathy, the minds and hearts, of the citizenry of Colombia and beyond.

Agha identifies much of the aggression in the Presidential debate as “tropic,” appealing to multiple and conflicting metapragmatic intuitions on the part of the “audiences,” both in the live debate arena and in its various broadcasted (television, radio) and reported (newspapers, magazines) frameworks (intuitions like judging a candidate’s utterance-turn as both “polite” and “nasty,” for example). But it is interesting to note that such intuitions may well be a function of

² Note furthermore that in Anglo-American courtroom practice the two stories are told not by a single participant narrator but by a carefully sequenced set of staged pseudo-dialogues, each a question-and-answer routine between counsel and witness in a two-part but clearly “monologic” (Bakhtin) interaction, the counsel being the Goffmanian author and animator. (Compare the interactional roles of Socrates and his various interlocutory victims in the set of eponymous pseudo-dialogues represented by Plato). Each counsel has a story-line worked out in which evidence, interrogated memory, etc. fit, and through Q-and-A this story gets told before the jurors. Interactionally, this is a complex pseudo-dialogue that is the “relay” (Barthes) of that which in effect constitutes of each side’s story a monologue communicated to the jurors as addressees. The interesting interplays of real dialogicality in the courtroom with the monologue pseudo-dialogically relayed constitute the space of risk, of slippage, of emergence in the Anglo-American jury system.

the complex possibilities of multiple Goffmanian (1979) “footings” — qualities of role inhabitation in interactional-text realtime that frame “what-is-said” (denotational text)—that the combatants are able to maintain by virtue of the complex staging of such an event.

When Mr Dole says in Agha’s segmented episode XIXa [example (23)], technically in dialogic second-pair part to the first pair-part question of moderator Jim Lehrer, “I’ve never discussed Whitewater,” he continues by turning to face Mr Clinton, saying “as I’ve told you [=Mr C] personally.” “I’m not discussing Whitewater now. But I am discussing And, hopefully, in the next segment you [=Mr C] could ...” Note that he is explicitly addressing Mr Clinton with his reportive metapragmatic disclaimer on how his interactional contribution is intended and presumably to be interpretatively taken, doing, of course, the verbal equivalent of Magritte’s legend, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” Interactionally he *is*, of course, “discussing” Whitewater, the [Kenneth] Burkean ‘entitlement’ for a political scandal in Mr Clinton’s gubernatorial past, and in fact his sentences in this sequence move in and out of explicitly addressing Mr Clinton—recall, before several nested tiers of onlookers—as well as being ambiguously first-person statements addressed to those very onlookers. Mr Dole’s “response” intersperses a number of different footings one with another, and does so with great overlap of footings, some segments being wholly multiple in this respect. Further, he does much more of the agonistically confrontational, interrupting the response-to-Lehrer footing and the direct-address-to-the-broadcast-audience footing many times with direct-address-to-Mr-Clinton footing, even while protesting his benign good will, gentlemanliness, and forbearance.

So much of the tropism exemplified seems to be at this level of incongruities of interactional-textual footing while manifesting sloppy shifts of foot[ing]work. Perhaps Mr Dole was interpreted in the American cultural scheme of expecting that aggressive people are people in the affectively-laden soup, who cannot keep their footing securely in one or another interactional role-inhabitations because, being nervous Davids interactionally battling complacent or at least cooler Goliaths, they act out a scenario of desperation. Jumping about the agonistic ring like a nervous boxer, Mr Dole attracts attention by uttering metapragmatic self-descriptions in one footing that are clearly contradicted or ambiguously to be pragmatically calibrated in another.

Such metapragmatic descriptors, of both referentially first- and second-persons—though all couched in third-person “constitutionalese,” we should note!—constitute much of the “negotiation,” in fact, that goes on through the public declamations and declarations of both the Colombian government and the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar. Like the most tightly-wrought dyadic rituals we are used to analyzing in smaller-scale societies, here the language of the self-elevating, other-deprecating give-and-take is dense with metapragmatic interpretation and characterization, both positive and negative, of each side’s history of deeds, present-participation, and future course of interaction: “The Government never has/will [illocutionary predicate]!”—“The Coordinated Front only intended/s to [illocutionary predicate]...!” — etc.

These metapragmatic descriptions, are first of all interactional-textual claims to moral self-legitimation in the face of unfair or illegitimate adversarial action. And, especially since they are put in third-person form, hence by virtue of this tropically (figuratively) excluding the Subject and Object referents from the interactional context, they literally invite the inclusion of the spectator-addressees, the Colombian public and even international community, in the group-interest ‘voicing’ moral indignation and the circumstantial necessities that have led to where the interaction is at that moment. The denotational text generated here in the agon precipitated by the bold entry of the Colombian rebels into the Venezuelan embassy in Bogota’ is a densely

structured poetics of claim and counterclaim at this level of metapragmatic description, each side of which is thus seeking to bring opinion to its cause by attempting to achieve the definitive and un-retort-able framing of what has been, is, and will have been going on³.

4. Discursive struggle as schismogenesis

A most interesting aspect of the politics of mass democratic societies is brought up by Jan Blommaert's account of the political debate during 1989-1993 over the "integration" of immigrant people in Belgian society, or at least to the nation-state of Belgium. In his account, he starts from the givens of this mode of politics, as noted by Bourdieu (1991: 171-202), that the social organization of the "field" of people who are the political professionals rests on their taking opposed political "positions" on particular "issues"—constituting a kind of advocacy for or against this or that—as their very mode of self/other differentiation as political personae.

This process of issue-centered political "leadership" in the microcosm of political debate before the macrocosm of the electorate involves turning certain terms and phrases into slogans, banner-copy, and hence pragmatically loaded indices-of-affiliation that appeal widely so as to attract at least partially like-minded adherents, who can index their affiliation by use of the terms and phrases. At the same time such terms and phrases are vague, or at least heretofore denotationally malleable, being more pragmatically (indexically) salient in the discursive processes of political "divisions of denotational labor" than semanticoreferentially undergirded by a systematic and theorized semantics. And especially important is the fact that around such pragmatically rather than semantically meaningful terms, a wide diversity of opinion can be organized into ideological binaries—think of the slogans "Prolife!" and "Prochoice!" in American politics of so-called "rights-to-life" vs. "reproductive freedom" political perspectives on the issue of abortion.

Now as Blommaert so nicely chronicles, in this Belgian political debate we can follow what Bateson (1936) would see as a structurally-driven "schismogenesis" because the very process of political self- and other-differentiation, carrying the electorate along with it, involves a kind of casuistry over precisely what we should see as the theorizability of critical terms, political discourse presuming to turn their meanings into what Vygotsky would call "scientific concepts," with their rationalized and structured relationships one to another, yet at the interactional-textual level being an indexical appeal, sometimes more covert than overt, for adherents to a political position. So the denotational discourse of this kind of politics is rational debate, but the pragmatics is agonistic.

But the case is worse. There is, in fact, "violence" here as well behind this particular political debate, with its arguments about whether or not "integration" includes "insertion" of immigrant people into Belgian society, and how many and varied are the criteria of successful "insertion," etc. that need administrative oversight. For the niceties of denotational taxonomizing and of stipulating definitional criteria are about particular people here: For example the children of immigrant parents who can be refused schooling because the school-as-market would, as we

³ Note that metapragmatic predications are, of necessity, perfective in Aktionsart, as I have elsewhere discussed (Silverstein 1992: 71-72), something that can be captured in English constructional grammar only with the 'Perfect' constructions, that embed perfectivity of 'aspect' with what we might call a kind of 'evidential' indexing to the context-of-communication.

say in American rational-choice political modeling, “tip” too far in demographic complexion to continue to attract non-immigrant “buyers,” perhaps because test-scores would show some decline. Does one need to point out that segregation in educational systems by denial of access is a kind of government violence against children and their parents, as the American experience of racial politics—to take a florid and obvious case—has vividly established?

The case Blommaert sketches is an interesting one, too, because in some sense the operation of the schismogenetic process seems to us to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, that is, to re-problematize and make a site of contention what seems to have been already settled. A policy had been articulated in a Royal Commission report, and majority parliamentary opinion got behind it. Yet, as we know, in the political discourse of a government-by-talk, we never know the meanings of any critical words and expressions until they have been institutionally tested and refined through contestation and conflict and have moved to a discursive position of no longer being the foci of conflict and contentiousness.⁴ What I have termed the inherently schismogenetic process into which the terms “integration,” etc. were inserted in Belgium in the period in question marks a moment in the history of that nation-state’s political discursive time in which the “meanings” were being worked out. The “meanings” of such terms are always heavily stereotypical in the technical, Putnamian (1975) sense, and are dialectically emergent from what we might term the collective intertextual unconscious organized around the set of political institutions constituting Belgian — and transnational — discursive space. Blommaert’s paper gives us glimpses of particular events in the longer trajectory of the process, which it would be good to be able to see as a structured field of interests that come together in the dialectic.

5. Pragmatic analysis: Adequacy and commitment

In concluding my remarks, I want to return to the other and more extended example of Haviland’s paper, the one that involves a contentious dispute in the Zinacanteco town hall in 1982. At issue and what came to a head in the dispute was everything from interpersonal hostilities between some men to shamanism as a religico-magical office of and for the hamlet of Nabenchauk to the role in local Chiapaneco politics of the national level PRI and competing political parties in Mexico. As Haviland’s analysis shows clearly, it is impossible to discern even what is the segmental structure of significant verbal acts here—what seems to be meaningful to the participants in the cause-and-effect coherence of what is happening to them—without

⁴ Already articulated by James Madison in *The Federalist* and in his private thoughts with respect to American constitutionalism is the notion that the meanings of critical words and phrases in any constitutional system are ever emergent—ever subject to the endless “presentist” retrospective and intertextual reading of cumulative precedent when they are the cruxes of an issue—, and especially that the meanings of words and phrases in such a political system are inherently of this nature. Hence note that when one introduces constitutional language, it means nothing until it has been tested by percolating through the entire discursive system of the political community. So for example, proponents of stipulating by U.S. Constitutional amendment that English “shall be the official language” of the country would be introducing a new term, the ‘meaning’ of which could emerge only by administrative translation, and then perhaps challenges, litigation, and legal decisions, not to mention the electoral process itself (“Throw the bums out!” or “Newt Gingrich for President!”), etc. The point is that such a process is inherent in the way that definitions and semantic relations of terms—words and expressions—are the nodal points in a dialectical process of this institutional form of politics, the sociocultural specificity of which needs to be understood.

realizing that “political, historical, and indeed biographical background information is never very far away in the arguments at hand, and we are thus not permitted the luxury of ethnographic blindness, a methodological myth” in doing a minimally adequate account of what counts as contentiousness, what counts as struggle, what counts as violence in the medium of discursive interactions, even face-to-face ones.

It is almost astounding that Haviland should feel that this needs to be said in the current stage of progress in pragmatic theory; but apparently a number of fundamental tenets of contemporary understanding are still unappreciated by at least some segment of his interlocutory addressees. Among these are, first, that it is impossible to reduce interactional textuality—the sociocultural cause-and-effect coherence of “what has/will have been done” in an interaction—to mere denotational textuality—the modalized propositional or informational coherence of “what has/will have been said” in an interaction. Hence, such reductive understandings as “conversation analysis” and “relevance”-theory are just excrescences of Western folk- or ethno-metapragmatics without promise of being anything more.

Second, then, since interactions are not merely iconic figurations of orderly, sequential information-structure—as if even denotational text really were!—we must recognize that it is a “poetics” of entextualization-and-contextualization all accomplished through indexicals that constitutes a complex, hierarchical and cross-cutting set of frameworks or structures within which—and only within which—even such things as “turns-at-talk” can receive minimal characterization, let alone such effects as “shifts-of-interactional-footing,” “distanced role-inhabitation,” “multiple voicings,” etc. The idea that things like “turns” lie in a concatenative linear arrangement like Pop-It beads, and that this should be our neutral theoretical expectation of “orderliness,” reminds one, *mutatis mutandis*, of the days in morphological or syntactic analysis before hierarchical constituency was discovered as the key to morphosyntactic form, or in phonology before the discovery of distinctive features as the fundamental categories of denotationally functional sound systems!

Third, the dialectical contingencies of discursive interaction, clearly heightened in the kinds of contestations-of-authoritative (i.e., operative hereinout) meanings revealed in discursive aggression, allow participants to appeal simultaneously to multiple scopes of inclusiveness of what one might term “context” within which a particular “reading” of the current state of interactional text dictates who has the advantage, by virtue of what licensing, etc. Sometimes the face-to-face transcribed denotational text is indeed merely the pre-[interactional]-text for the actual discursive interaction that is going on, in relayed and mediated remove from the face-to-face. We have seen exemplified in this set of studies the complexities of such multiply and variously embedded frameworks of operative pragmatic contextualization only within which can we understand the indexical significance of “what-is-said.”

There are many more lessons to be extracted, to be sure, enough for each of the inherently inadequate attempts at reductive scientism in pragmatic analysis. But the point to make is, rather, one about the close relationship that emerges, by contrast, between adequacy of pragmatic analysis and the inherent commitment to engaging with what we must term the macropolitics of discourse. Adequate pragmatic analysis forces the analysts themselves to contemplate the very issues and conditions of being that are the concern of the people whose discursive interaction we are interested in. As social scientists interested in gender, race, and other emergently constructive categories of sociocultural life have long since understood, even what appears to be the most minutely “private” and “personal” matters are “political” in this particular sense: That such categories through which we experience ourselves and others in social life are ever

refashioned (transformed in their very indexical invocation) in the particularities of interaction at all levels and degrees of directness or mediatedness, and that the abstract and macro-level institutional structures of social formations are experienceable only in this way.

To engage with any specifically sociocultural phenomenon—as opposed, say, to a neurobiological one—is of necessity then to engage with the politics of the abstract and macro in the experience of the micro. Certainly these studies of some of the ways that macro-level “violence” emerges in micro-level discourse and even text, some of the ways that micro-level discursive interaction concentrates and superimposes the social struggles at the macro-level in the seemingly “disorderly” qualities of micro-level denotational text—certainly these studies summon us to realize that pragmatic analysis of the theoretically and methodologically adequate kind cannot—indeed, does not want to—hide from its responsibilities of commitment to clarifying issues in the wider context of politics both explicit and covert.

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